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### Glaze: Art and Death in a Senufo Village

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## Glaze: Art and Death in a Senufo Village

But let me restate, in concluding, the very real strengths of the book: Hales has identified a subject that has long needed systematic study, and he has given it the coherent and sweeping treatment it deserves, organizing a bewildering mass of images into a useful framework; along the way, he has provided a wealth of ingenious observations about specific photographs that are most convincing when most anchored in the social and artistic contexts of the time. In short, Hales has broken new ground and drawn some basic and indispensable maps that other scholars will want to examine (and perhaps argue with) in more detail.

**Anita J. Glaze.** *Art and Death in a Senufo Village.* Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1981. xvi + 267 pp.; map, plates, appendix, notes, bibliography, glossary, index. \$25.00.

**Reviewed by Leon Siroto**  
New York City

This review will attempt to go beyond appraisal of the book's content into questions posed by the author's choice of that material and the ways of explaining it. The intensive study of African art has gone into its fourth decade; we should begin to assess its means and ends in terms of its explanation of the long-standing questions it has posed. Investigators have resorted to diverse disciplines, often in combination, and numerous styles in studying the art of traditional African societies. Their findings sometimes lead us to reflect on the definition of art and the extent to which they would agree with one another on the limits of the phenomenon.

The book under review brings these questions to mind; indeed, its high quality brings them into sharper perspective. Beyond its substantive contribution, it strikes a note of "where are we going" that should resound into Africanists' consideration of disciplinary outlooks and stratagems in the study of traditional art.

A brief introduction to the society under consideration may be helpful to less specialized readers. The Senufo people form a large ethnic block that has been long settled in a wide belt of West African parkland extending through contiguous parts of Mali, Ivory Coast, and Upper Volta. They live in large, cohesive villages that have tended to be autonomous and democratic in their political life. As the farthest western outlier of the Voltaic(Gur)-speaking peoples, the

Senufo entity, relatively peaceful and altogether open to the armies and nonbelligerent migrations from the more sophisticated Manding-speaking societies, has acquired—in at least its material culture—a substantial Manding veneer.

In the hope of gaining some control over the unseen forces governing their lives, the Senufo organized cults distinguished by ritual of considerable complexity and by imagery famous for its withdrawn-seeming elegance. The best-known cult has been Poro, a paramount association that encompasses most village men. Poro teaches knowledge of the world and deals with the supernatural power thought necessary to harness its forces. It initiates its members and marks its hierarchical structure largely by means of images and costumes.

The cult images include both statues and masks. These objects make up the universe of Senufo art as we have become accustomed to think of it. They can commemorate group and lineage founders, while others represent spirits of the wild.

We are most familiar with Senufo images made of wood and brass. Senufo style in wooden images has been known widely in the West ever since the beginning of its interest in African sculpture. Its gracile refinement, striking schematization, and dark luster always seemed quintessentially African. We have believed such images to be fashioned exclusively by groups of foreign origin who became integrated into Senufo society over varying lengths of time. These artisans have remained socially distinct from their farmer-patrons. We were inclined to think that only they were involved in the production of Senufo art, since we were also inclined to believe that all imagery was made for secret use in the Poro cult.

For the better part of our acquaintance with Senufo art we have not gone much beyond admiration and mystification. Before the appearance of this book our access to Senufo society—and especially its Poro—had been minimal. Dr. Glaze's wide scope and special insights greatly extend our comprehension of this people and their art. As is inevitable in studies of traditional African art, simplicity gives way to complexity, and mystery must retreat.

Although trained as an art historian, the author here shows a major interest in the contemporary social contexts of imagery. Long familiar with the Senufo at first hand, she was in a position to exploit both advantages: Senufo traditional art seems to be flourishing in the sector that she studied.



Dr. Glaze introduces us to the population, society, and culture of a narrowly circumscribed region in the southwest of central Senufoland. (She claims that the central area is the most productive of art.) The region, around the town of Dikodougou, is populated by the Kufolo and Fodonon farmers and their attendant artisan groups. (Dr. Glaze uses the marked contrasts between these ethnic units to make important points about style.)

In order to set a realistic balance in our perspective on Senufo art, she provides us with an overview of "art and the women's sphere." Women's associations of different kinds play crucial roles in the conceptualization and use of certain wooden and brass images.

In the following chapter—"art and the men's sphere"—we are guided through the Poro by way of a detailed description of its initiation cycle. In these contexts, mainly public ones, we become acquainted with the forms and ritual uses of images—preponderantly masks—associated with Poro. We are told considerably less about kinds of images, mainly large wooden statues, that we might also infer, from the elimination of other possibilities, to play a role in that cult. From this disproportion in treatment, we might conclude that such figures are kept and used in less public circumstances. (Dr. Glaze does not acquaint us with the mode and extent of her entry into Poro, although her coverage seems to surpass all others published.)

The title of the book is fully realized in the fourth chapter: "The Funeral As Synthesis." In this connection, the funeral relates to death in its liveliest sense, not so much concerned with grief and memorialization as with the celebration of the status of the deceased, of his kin and peers, and, ultimately, of his village. The idea of synthesis here operates on many levels: the "spheres" of men and women, the objects that reflect these interdependent worlds, and the patterns of actions and sounds that give these objects their importance in ritual.

Within this frame Dr. Glaze presents a vivid account of traditional art in its context. Unlike most previous studies of the Senufo, hers is admirably focused. Her terms are precise; her observations are all first hand, detailed, and integrated with one another.

In particular, we are indebted to this study for a new view into the inventory and social background of the material that we choose to deal with as Senufo art. Several major points shape this change in our perspective.

1. Women play crucial roles in the ritual and social background of Senufo art. This participation seems to be limited only by their exclusion from the manufacture of ritual images.
2. Strong and complex aesthetic values and rationales are explicit in the diverse ritual techniques of Senufo society.

3. Differences between the art styles of Senufo subgroups are quite apparent. The processes of separation, migration, and re-encounter have served to introduce different ideas to subgroups and subsequently to diffuse them to other subgroups.
4. Disguising costumes of cloth, string, and shredded fiber are of great ritual and aesthetic importance in Poro. These cover the wearer without recourse to carved or cast elements representing head and/or face. Types and variants of such "soft" disguises correspond closely with farmer subgroups and localities.

While this study is a major contribution and quite defensible within its frame, it does pose larger questions about the fields of art that investigators select, define, and explain. Dr. Glaze does not intend to tell us here about what makes Senufo art distinctive and why it should be. A reviewer cannot fault a book for not answering questions that it never proposed to deal with. Yet, the kind of perspective that Dr. Glaze has chosen can lead us to wonder about the future for our knowledge of the past of African traditional imagery and for the prospects of resolution of the problems that this awareness of the past has indicated.

Traditional African sculpture first engaged Western thought by its distinctive approach to form. The background for the African choice of the shapes making up an image proved largely enigmatic and still remains so. The initial appeal of the first-known carved figures and masks should grant them some priority in efforts at explaining the nature of African art, which we may take to mean African views of form. In being realized, these forms assuredly went through sequences of development. Such sequences should enter into the subject matter of art history dealing with African art, even if their reconstruction cannot go far beyond speculation. The most valuable speculation in this regard would come from those who have investigated the questions in the field.

Coming to the end of Dr. Glaze's book, specialized readers will feel that they have been allowed a valuable insight into a moment in time, into what Senufo art has become in one region. However, to our surprise, the wooden forms that intrigued us before we read the book do not take precedence in the Senufo scheme of imagery. We find that they are of coordinate, and sometimes subordinate, importance in relation to disguises made entirely of cloth, string and shredded fibers. These "soft" masks appear to be more numerous—in both type and quantity—and to play more roles in ritual than do the wooden forms carved by artisan groups.



From the Senufo point of view, these "soft" masks are as much art as are the wooden ones. Dr. Glaze would agree—as would most anthropologists—and thus treats all ritual disguises evenhandedly. Within the narrow confines of this work, her choice greatly reduces her engagement with the questions of iconography long posed by the carved images that we have thought of as central to Senufo art. Indeed, Dr. Glaze indicates that the local variation in these farmer-conceived (i.e., truly Senufo) "soft" disguises provides a more suitable field for the study of style than does that made up by the works of ironworkers and woodcarvers (p. 136).

Dr. Glaze's envisioning of a new balance in the study of substyles of Senufo art might be reflected in some disquieting inconsistencies in her remarks on features serving to identify types and styles of carved images. We are told that figures carved by blacksmith groups—as opposed to those carved by the group of artisans that work exclusively with wood—are distinguished by a very schematic rendering of the hand and by the complete merging of the feet into a base (p. 14). These features and this style, she claims, are exemplified in the spectacular and seemingly unique Senufo figures used to pound time in certain ceremonies.

We find a range of such figures in Goldwater's monograph on Senufo sculpture (1964); Dr. Glaze's illustrations of the type are also found in this source. In the series shown by Goldwater three of the figures clearly have their feet brought out of the base: Plates 89 and 91. Moreover, the figure in Plate 89 seems to have been made by the same hand that made the one in Plate 90, an example that has no feet. Two other examples—Plates 94 and 95—seem to have their hands reasonably well worked out. (Apropos of these rhythm-pounders, they are mentioned only in this discussion of style, although we are told elsewhere that they play an important role in funerary ceremonies [Glaze 1981:46–47].) We are not told whether they are used in the region under consideration.

An instance of ambiguity in the assignment of diagnostic features seems to occur in the discussion of the *kunugbaha* mask, a long-jawed animal type used by the Fono ironworkers. Dr. Glaze claims that this image lacks the antelope-horn motif (p. 213). On the other hand, she illustrates an example of this mask which seems to have curving horns that seem comparable to those of other versions of the long-jawed animal mask—e.g., *gbon* and *kponyungo*—used by other groups in this region (p. 20, but seen much more clearly in the same photograph on the book jacket). If the process arising from the back of the pictured mask's head does not represent a horn, Dr. Glaze should have told us how it is to be interpreted.

Granted that our evaluation of carved objects as a higher order of art than fiber and cloth costumes is ethnocentric, deriving more from our museum experience than a concern with art in its context and the affect that it produces in such situations. Indeed, our emotional response to carved images may depend considerably upon our inevitable detachment from that original context, a separation that leads to a state in which we can experience the surprise of radical transformations and recombinations of natural forms. While "soft" disguises can partake of this quality, their nature limits the full range of play: they can either take simple abstract shapes or follow the human form as they change its texture and color.

Dr. Glaze's approach to Senufo art, while it may disappoint those who had hoped for a resolution of older questions through an engagement with first things first, does serve an important end in leading us to perceive an ever-growing dilemma in the study of African traditional art: Whose art are we to study in the field? Ours (i.e., the art that affects us for our reasons) or theirs? The question is not to be pursued in this space, but it may bear importantly on future studies.

Considering Dr. Glaze's approach in the light of these questions of levels of art and priority of perspective reveals two tendencies that might limit the wider relevance of her contribution. These tendencies suggest the risk inherent in getting very close to one's subject in field investigation.

In the first instance, she tends to assign primacy to the Senufo in the conception and development of their art. Her point of view is, so to speak, "Senufo-centric." The rigid delimitation of a field of historical study may work well in the case of an island society or a similarly isolated group. The Senufo, however, have long found themselves at the easily accessible center of currents of culture change that swept over both the western Sudan and the Guinea Coast. True, the book does offer some comparisons between certain Senufo ideas and forms and those of other Voltaic-speaking peoples. While the backgrounds for these correspondences are not explored, one senses the implication that the feature concerned is either of Senufo origin or at least of very long duration in that culture. These assumptions of priority or great antiquity may be difficult to sustain.

From what we find in the literature, the Voltaic-speaking peoples that had masking institutions originally used disguises of fibers, stalks, and leaves almost exclusively. Wooden masks seem to have been a later introduction, as is suggested both by skeuomorphic correspondences between Manding carved forms and Voltaic composite ones (i.e., reeds, leaves,



basketry elements) and by the separate identities and histories of carving groups that have become integrated into Voltaic societies.

Dr. Glaze evinces a disinclination to consider this dynamic in her suggestion that the similarity of certain Senufo wooden masks to those of the Manding groups that Bravmann studied in the Bondoukou region (1974: chap. 7) should lead us to consider the Senufo origin of the latter (p. 243, note 10). This notion vaults high over the complex background of Western Sudanic art. Senufo art is no more ancient or hermetic than any other in a wide region. The collaboration of artisans and farmers in the fixing of types and styles of imagery offers a rich field for art-historical investigation; the question of origins cannot be otherwise addressed. The marked contrasts between the styles of larger ethnic groups suggest that farmers may have played a coordinate role in the conceptualization of the images that they used, but this remains to be seen.

Dr. Glaze should remain open to the possibility that, in certain aspects of their art, the Senufo have been receivers rather than donors, in which case the more crucial area of study would not be so much local variation as ethnic reinterpretation. In this connection, one might note that some authors, including Dr. Glaze (p. 38), tell of a cult, *Lo*, practiced by the Dyula groups (Manding-speakers) living among the Senufo. *Lo* seems to be quite similar to the Senufo Poro. Indeed, an important author, G. Bochet, who was based in Central Senufo country for some time, claims that *Lo* greatly influenced the development of Poro (1965:671–672). This does not imply that Poro is not of Senufo origin, but it does suggest caution in the acceptance of a monolithic view of Senufo—or any other Western Sudanic—culture.

This point can lead into consideration of another self-limiting quality that I find implicit in Dr. Glaze's approach. Despite occasional forays into questions of origin—more that of ethnic groups than of art forms—she deals essentially with a relatively short interval of time, i.e., a number of "multimedia events" that took place during her visits to the Senufo in the 1960s and 1970s. To our great profit we learn about the network of social relationships that frames Senufo art in use; we are given an interpretation of what the use of art does for the Senufo community; but we are told less than we would expect about how and when the art came to be.

The rich narrative and illustrations pose a number of art-historical questions. Would Dr. Glaze's picture of the art that she would have us assume to be traditional be true for 1920? 1900? 1880? Is all the elaborate and diversified pageantry of contemporary Poro disguise a faithful reproduction of what prevailed before the Pax Gallica and its stimulating effect upon

communication between peoples formerly separated by distance, suspicion, and hostility? Did Senufo communities in the troubled times before the turn of the century enjoy the affluence and security that would allow them to undertake such displays of conspicuous consumption?

Bochet mentions an ongoing proliferation of disguise and ritual categories generated by the rivalry for prestige between different villages' Poro groups (1965:661). Dr. Glaze's rather fleeting treatment of this aspect of Senufo art (pp. 135–136) appears to confirm her concern with the total phenomenon at its synchronic level. However, if the art-historically motivated reader is here given little insight into the societal and technical dynamics that played upon the development of the forms and activities so impressively described, then the anthropologically motivated one might expect to follow this description into the particular effects of the use of images upon the society before and well after the performance. Here again, synchronic limits intervene; action and effect become encapsulated in the brief moment and explain each other circularly.

In the area of interpretation, Dr. Glaze's enthusiasm for her subject seems to lead her to deal with her material on two different levels of explanation and to seek causal primacy on the nonempirical one. Thus:

The Senufo funeral is a multimedia event designed to protect the living and ensure the continuing integration of social groups and the village as a whole with the spiritual world of the Deity, the ancestors, and the bush spirits. Secondary gains, such as the reinforcement of social values, group integration within the village, the stimulation of the creative arts, and the pleasures of pure aesthetic enjoyment are contingent upon the first and central purpose of the funeral. [p. 149]

This casual weighting on behalf of the Senufo religious view is at variance with anthropological priorities, which would take the first two of Dr. Glaze's secondary gains to be the primary ones and her primary ones to be Senufo views, very important at their level of raw information but lying far beyond the possibility of proof.

In this light, some of the space given over to the description of events—a fair number of them not closely connected with the materialization and use of tangible art—could have been devoted to a discussion of the religious rationale for the many cloth, string, and shredded fiber disguises—in effect, personages—with which this book acquaints us. Dr. Glaze deals carefully with these images in an admirable appendix that presents them in terms of their ethnic contexts, relation to Poro structure and ritual,



material composition, accompaniment, and performance. Beyond one particular type, however, we are not told of the individual identities of such disguises. The types are named and sometimes appear in numbers. Do they represent individuals with personal names and distinctive behavioral characteristics or are they standard theatrical/ritual accessories, as some types of Dogon mask seem to be? The information would be interesting to compare with the data that Le Moal collected among the Bobo (Upper Volta), to whom each fiber mask has a distinct personality and identity (1980:209, 210, 257).

Certain aspects of personal viewpoint and style might detract from this book's authority. One notes an inclination toward fashionable notions and gratuitous innovation. This tendency seems explicit both in part of the overall rationale and in the terminology employed in many instances. For example, dealing with traditional African societies, field investigators have, sometimes in oversight of the circumstances, tended to minimize or neglect the role of women in the conception, commission, and use of major art forms. The Central Senufo case provides a striking caution against this tendency. Dr. Glaze instructs us convincingly in the coordinate and sometimes superordinate importance of women in Senufo religious and artistic life. This is one of the salient contributions of her book, and it should serve to open our eyes to the possibility of analogous conditions in many of the art-producing societies that we have come to take for granted. (This is not to imply that they will always be found.)

A sort of neophilia seems apparent in the intensity with which this question of female importance is pursued through most of the book. This thrust seems to resound of the feminist political movement current—and altogether justified—in Western life and thought. My reservations concern, first, a degree of emphasis and repetition that might approach excess and, second, a skewing of the material to establish primacy in a very complex situation.

This objective seems implicit in the claim that the woman founder of a local lineage or her direct descendant must be, ideologically speaking, the "true head" of the local Poro cult representing that lineage (pp. 51, 53). The claim would hinge on the precise meaning of the term "true head," which is not sufficiently explained. Even ideologically speaking, a position corresponding to this term would involve a considerable amount of decision and policy making. Dr. Glaze does not deal with this aspect of female participation in Poro matters. Accounts of the inner working of the Poro at the administrative level have not yet been offered, and, in their absence, we are free to wonder whether the cult, as a reflection of Senufo society, really provides for any office that would fulfill our expectations of a "true head."

A fascination with the new for its own sake comes through in a number of neologisms which seem neither necessary nor felicitous. I find nothing gained by "micromigration" (p. 25), "protointiate" (p. 117), and "autocensored" (p. 235). Other constructions, while put together of familiar terms, might confuse the reader by suggesting meanings that lie beyond redundancy: e.g., "a host of animate spirits" (p. 12), and an "object assemblage" (p. 153).

That meaningless but indestructible horror, "craft" taken as a verb, challenges us when we learn that the women of the woodcarving artisan group are, with no further explanation, "calabash crafters" (p. 5). How does one craft a calabash? The terms "masker" and "masquerader" seem to be used interchangeably (p. 105, *passim*); I could infer no contrast from their contexts. One must try to forestall these ambiguities at some point; they are quick to enter discourse, and a prevailing inertia can keep them forever in use, as in the case of the needless and patronizing term "bush cow" for the African buffalo.

One wonders whether more painstaking and specialized editing might not have eliminated a number of the lapses in this important book. Most investigators involved with humanistic studies in sub-Saharan Africa have not engaged with the study of details of natural habitat; one can readily understand that their concern with the intricacies of human behavior would assign such matters to a level of lesser importance. Nevertheless, in terms of the finished product, error in this sector can stand out boldly and cast doubt upon precision, and even credibility, in other sectors. One regrets that Dr. Glaze's account contains such shortcomings.

We are told how, in the old days, Senufo hunters "braved . . . wildcats (e.g., genet, civet cat) with their weapons of arrows and stabbing spears used at close range" (p. 43). The Senufo are said to be a tall people, while the genet and civet are quite small carnivores, annoying through their depredations upon small domestic animals but not much more dangerous than a nonrabid fox or skunk.

The horns of the roan antelope are said to be elements in the composition of certain long-jawed animal masks (p. 137). The arching horns of this antelope in their natural alignment seem never to appear in such images.

The fiber used in certain disguises is said to be raffia (p. 109, *passim*), although the relevant photographs strongly suggest another source, possibly the bark of a species of *Hibiscus*. The tight-fitting string costumes of some of the types of disguise are said to be knit (p. 109, *passim*), when it is more likely that they were fashioned by other techniques. The point that I wish to make in engaging with these details is that such matters may be just as important as spell-



ing and punctuation. The editorial function should include the sending of worthwhile manuscripts to readers who are informed in the natural backgrounds and technical inventories of the societies, or at least the regions, concerned.

The publishers of this book should have treated its resources with greater appreciation and care. Dr. Glaze's photographs, which she took herself, are technically and didactically excellent. The color photographs are reproduced well in special sections. The black-and-white photographs, however, are printed on unsized text pages, a process which results in considerable darkening. In the field subjects this quality can obscure significant detail.

The publisher's transcription of Senufo words uses umlauts to distinguish vowels usually designated by standard phonetic symbols. This convention is carefully explained, but my attention could never pass easily through the plethora of marks usually associated with other, and quite different, sounds.

Africanists know of the much simpler and clearer system used in Nigeria, where a dot under a conventional letter assigns it a different phonetic meaning.

I bring these criticisms up only in the interest of maintaining precision in discourse concerned with African traditional art. Dr. Glaze's book brings these questions to mind only incidentally. Its merits place it far above any serious criticism. It should be entirely welcome as a source and a promise.

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**Fredric Jameson, Victor Burgin, Cora Kaplan, et al.** Formations of Pleasure. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983. 179 pp. \$10.95.

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A feminist man enjoys, to his surprise, looking at the naked woman photographed in the centerfold; a monk is distracted from prayer by carved arabesques; a Marxist admires the elegance of a TV advertisement for a stockbroker. What we thus enjoy visually is only partly determined by our acknowledged beliefs, and the study of pleasure in visual imagery cuts across distinctions between popular and serious art, revealing how complex the connections between belief and vision are. A picture is true or false according to whether it shows the world as it is; and if that sort of truth is difficult enough to judge, true or false pleasures in imagery are still more complex. In one sense, a pleasure, as a sensation, simply *is* and so cannot be true or false. Psychosomatic headaches differ from "true" ones not in being less painful but in having the wrong sorts of causes. Somewhat analogously, false pleasures are those I would not have if I had the right sorts of beliefs. My feminist, monk, and Marxist enjoy guiltily what they believe they should, given their beliefs, disdain. More complex are cases where some observer tells a person what he should not enjoy, as when, for example, some feminists argue that no one ought to enjoy pornography. Were a man's beliefs different, he would not enjoy pornography; but so, too, were I repelled by Christianity, Giotto might disgust me. So the notion of false pleasures can be defined in a noncircular way only if we have some convincing theory of human nature, some explanation of why some visual pleasures ought to be sought.

These writers, critics of the false visual pleasures of late capitalism, point to the ways in which our culture encourages us to treat as natural what is a product of our visual ideologies. Artworks like Kruger's collages critique these prevailing mythologies, her practice thus a parallel to the theory presented by Jameson, Owens, and the other writers. The key reference